CHRISTMAS: VISION AND REALITY
MATTHEW 2:12-20
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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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In his Christmas oratorio, "For the Time Being", W. H. Auden has the wise men explain why they followed the star to Bethlehem.

The first wise man says:
"To discover how to be truthful now
Is the reason I follow this star."

The second says,
"To discover how to be living now
is the reason I follow this star."

The third says,
"To discover how to be loving now
Is the reason I follow this star."

And then all three say together,
"To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star."

The wise men had a vision, that is to say; a vision of human life in terms of its potential, a vision of life filled with integrity, authenticity and love. And in pursuit of that vision they were willing to ride hundreds of miles across the desert following a strange and new star.

One has wonder, however, what happened to their noble vision when they confronted the reality of the stable. They fell down and worshipped him, Matthew reports. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to be sure. But I wonder what happened to the vision afterward as they thought about it - as they saddled up their camels and rode back across the dessert to their life as kings or astrologers or whatever they were.

The manger was a bit humble, to say the very least. We've decorated and romanticized it for the purposes of our Christmas traditions. But in reality it would have been a dark, cold, dank place, probably very dirty. I would guess that it didn't smell very good either; and that, our tidy nativities notwithstanding, it wasn't at all comfortable or pretty or pleasant.

It would have been quite a come-down from their noble vision of humanity to that. Not to mention the fact that their pursuit of the vision had already put them in a tight spot with Herod, and that they were forced to sneak out of Judea by another route in order to avoid the King.

The same kind of issue can be raised about the shepherds. They had a vision too. Out

on the hillside they had heard a voice, and beautiful music; and they had come running down from the hills to Bethlehem to see the thing which the mysterious hillside experience had revealed to them. One has to wonder what happened to their vision afterward. Did it mean anything to them as they went back to tending their sheep? Or was it, rather, a one-time experience, that seemed exciting and terribly important as it was happening, but which receeded in importance with the passing of time?

The same kinds of questions can, of course, be asked of ourselves - which is what I propose to do this morning. We have gone to Bethlehem too - it's a yearly pilgrimage for us. We have done in ritual and custom and memory and celebration exactly what the wisemen and shepherds did. And what about our vision? It's one of God as loving father: it's one of humanity in terms of love and affection and generosity: it is a vision of peace and good will among men in the world. What happens to our vision? Can it stand the test of reality? Does it have anything to do with our world as it commenced in earnest on December 26?

Visions have a way of evaporating into thin air when confronted by reality. "The trouble with idealists", someone has observed, "is that they don't often like the places their ideals take them or the things their ideals ask them to do." I would guess that everyone of us has had personal experience with that: we've had a vision of what we wanted to do or accomplish in life, but when we discovered the places our vision was taking us and the things we would have to do, we gave it up. In the world of personal visions there are plenty of concert musicians, brain surgeons, and All-American athletes. But those visions demand long days of rehearsal, or years of study, or hours of practice. And most of us get them aside.

Life is full of illustrations. A whole generation of young people, born after the Second World War, emerged several years ago with a vision of peace and justice and love. With idealistic and burning zeal they attacked the social ills of our society. They protested and marched and went to jail. They dropped out of school to work for candidates for political office. But many are now disallusioned. Many have dropped out - given up - the vision has evaporated. Because the reality to which that kind of vision inevitably leads is the rather unspectacular world of local politics - electing precinct committeemen, and county chairmen, and delegates to state conventions. The reality to which the noble vision of a peaceful and just society leads is defeat and disappointment, going at it again, being

defeated and disappointed again.

Many have concluded that the system doesn't work - because they tried it once and were not able to see the immediate results of their effort. Many have concluded that the vision isn't worth it because of the places the vision leads and the kind of persistance and commitment it demands.

The same kind of thing occurred in the last decade when Civil Rights became the subject of a lot of people's vision. Millions of Americans shared Martin Luther King's dream of men of all races standing shoulder to shoulder building a better tomorrow. But when the vision' didn't materialize overnight; when it became apparent that the vision meant someone had to force the issue legally and get arrested; when it became apparent that a lot of Black people didn't believe the vision and weren't all that excited about integration, the cause faltered.

Young ministers emerge from seminary with a burning vision of the Church as the Body of Christ, advocate of the poor, protector of the weak, fellowship of love and reconciliation. Armed with a lofty theology of the word they preach scholarly sermons and initiate innovative programs to serve humanity in their own locale. But reality is confronted in the form of the struggling rural parish to which they are called, where paying the gas bill next month is considerably more important then advocating the case of the poor and arranging the Christmas bazaar has a much higher priority than reconciling the world. Reality confronts the vision in the form of an entrenched church bureaucracy that appears to be more interested in perpetuating itself than serving mankind. Reality, in our system, confronts the vision in the form of the Presbytery where real authority lies, and where a man has to learn to be honest but fair, commited but flexible, and above all skilled in the art of negotiation. Well, many aren't willing to go to the places and do the things which the vision dictates. And so young ministers turn cynical and quit - all too frequently.

It even happens to laymen as they are elected and ordained as Elders. Ordinarily a person brings idealism and enthusiasm to his very first term on the Session of Presbyterian Church. He has a kind of developing vision of what his congregation can be - say, a place where Christians grow and learn, for instance. So he works toward that end, and is instrumental in setting up a first-rate adult education program. But nobody comes - and it is very tempting to set the vision aside, and settle for the business-as-usual matters of

simply paying the bills and seeing that no one gets too unhappy.

Dr. Ernest Campbell of New York's Riverside Church observes that "The fatality rate for visions in our time is very high". The young have a phrase for it: it's called "Copping out". It means simply what I've been talking about - giving up on the lofty, inspiring goals one has set, setting the noble vision aside, settling for less, because the reality which the vision must confront sooner or later is just too difficult.

As we come to the end of one year and the beginning of another I am convinced that we need a renewal of vision. I sense that people have given up on our nation and system: I sense a deepening cynicism about our national goals, about responsiveness and integrity in government at all levels. I see a whole counter-culture, consisting mainly of young people, dropping out conspicuously and rather ostentatiously; but I regard as even more tragic - and potentially dangerous - the genteel cop-out which comes in the phrase, "What's the use?"

"Without vision the people perish" Proverbs advises (29:18) Without a noble goal, an inspiring vision of what the world could be and what I can accomplish life becomes flat and stale and ultimately quite boring. The story is told of a tourist who was visiting a coal mine, who watched a miner for a long time doing his job, and who finally expressed sympathy to the man for having to stand in a damp tunnel all day performing a rote and boring task. The miner was taken aback: he picked up a lump of coal and said: "I don't think you quite understand. This is not just a lump of coal. THis is light and heat and power. Perhaps it will light a city street, or it may warm a home or run a train. I'm not just a miner for this company I'm the helper of people who never heard of me." (E. Campbell, The Protestant Hour, Fall, 1969, P. 23) That's vision: that's vision and reality in perfect tension: not too much of one or the other.

Beginning with the birth of Christ, the Christian faith has always kept its lofty visions in healthy tension with reality. Professor Richard Shaull of Princeton Seminary puts it this way: "Biblical faith, contrary to most ancient religions, does not set us within an eternal metaphysical order, but rather focuses our attention on man's life within history. There, in the midst of the common experiences of daily life in family, community and nation, God meets and calls his people." (Ibid P.20)

In our Old Testament lesson this morning we read together about a lofty vision, spelled out in the language of poetry: people dwelling in the land of deep darkness: God's light penetrating that darkness. Reality there is the actual history of Israel - the painful, sometimes almost hopeless, struggle of a people to survive. And their survival to this day is the result of keeping the vision alive, but always within the framework of history - whether that be Babylon,Judea or the Warsaw Ghetto.

The life of Jesus himself reveals the same tension between the vision and reality. No sooner had Mary given birth than the Holy Family had to pick up and travel to Egypt in order to excape the brutal wrath of a jealous king. The Sermon the Mount is recognized as one of the greatest instances of religious and moral teaching the world has ever known. It' contains a beautiful vision of what God created men to be. But the teacher, Jesus himself, came down from the mountain to deal with the reality of common life, tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, rude fishermen. The Last Supper, a magnificent vision of love and brotherhood, contained something as real as an argument, terminated with a betrayal and was followed by a public execution.

The word Bethlehem itself, I was interested to discover has been used in a way that illustrates both the vision and reality. In the fifteenth century an order of nuns in London established the Bethlehem hospital for the insane: an expression certainly of the vision of Christmas charity and love. But over the years the word Bethlehem was corrupted and became "Bedlam". The name stuck - and the word came to define the kind of behavior associated with the patients in the hospital. From Bethlehem to Bedlam: from the manger to the flight to Egypt: from the vision to reality.

Christmas is a visionary experience for us. As we make our preparations our hearts warm, our generosity is limited only by the funds we have, we are kinder, more cheerful, more affectionate. Christmas is the vision of human life as it could be. And we've seen it again. We've been to Bethlehem. We've experienced that wonderful once-a-year happiness: we've given and received: we've laughed and cried. And now it's over.

Every day can't be Christmas. And yet if there was any authenticity to what we celebrated here last Sunday night - that vision needs badly to be kept alive: to be kept in strong and healthy tension with our daily lives.

We don't know what the Wise Men did when they returned to their homes, but we can speculate that life was different for them: that having seen God's love incarnate in that humble setting, even the most common, ordinary activities of their lives became the vehicles for that same love.

We have been to Bethlehem, and now we must return: this week - to school, work, problems, income taxes, to life in earnest. Won't you take the vision of Christmas with you? Whatever reality is for you Tuesday Morning at 8:00 A.M, won't you keep it in tension with the vision of peace and affection and joy that you celebrated last week?

Harold Blake Walker, writing in the Chicago Tribune,said it eloquently:

"Unless our spirits are jaded and lacking in spiritual sensitivity, Christmas can renew our lives with faith, hope and new meaning so that, like the shepherds, we can return to the common round of our days with both joy and gratitude. The gleeful laughter of the children, the love and devotion of those who are dearest to us, and the kindly affection of friends compose a gentle conspiracy of God to remind us that life and toil are worthwhile."

May the vision of Christmas stay alive in your heart in the coming year. And may God's gentle conspiracy break in on you - in each of its days. AMEN

Father, we are grateful for the season of Christmas - and for its vision of peace and love. Help us now to keep that vision alive as we return from Bethlehem. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN